

Long delays, train car stoppage continues at Franklin Park train crossings

The afternoon of April 7, drivers waited about 30 minutes while four trains blocked vehicle traffic on 25th Avenue south of Franklin Avenue.

First a Canadian Pacific freight train heading west stopped traffic. Then two Metra trains going in opposite directions. Then, before the gates could lift, another Canadian Pacific freight train heading east came along.

Stoppage of cars by trains is common in Franklin Park, which has somewhere over 100 trains running through the village every 24 hours.

To alleviate those stoppages, the village government has engaged CH2M Engineering to study the possibility of building railroad grade separations — underpasses or overpasses — along five streets near downtown where north-south vehicle traffic intersects rails. Those streets are Scott Street, Ruby, Calwagner, 25th and Edgington.

“We’ve had train delays as long as an hour,” Village Engineer Dave Talbott said. “Metra (trains) are relatively quick. It’s the long freight trains that are parked that cause the real heartburn.”

Those include Canadian Pacific — which has a rail yard in Franklin Park and Bensenville — Union Pacific and several smaller local rail companies.

The Chicago metropolitan area is a huge hub for freight traffic, said Alex Beata, an associate policy analyst for Chicago Metropolitan Agency For Planning.

“About 1 billion tons of freight worth more than \$1 trillion move through the Chicago region,” Beata said. “About a quarter of all freight in North America. Six of the seven (largest) railroads have terminal facilities in Chicago. That’s the only place in the nation where so many (of the largest) railroads meet in the nation.”

A downside to all that freight train traffic is vehicle traffic being delayed. Tom Murtha, a senior planner at Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, said it’s considerable.

“In 2002, nearly 11,000 hours of delay occurred on typical weekdays for motorists in the Chicago region,” Murtha said. “That fell to a little less than 8,000 hours per weekday in 2011.”

Grade separations stops delays in vehicle traffic. Its also reduces the risk of crashes between vehicles and trains and reduces exhaust from idling vehicles.

Drivers in Franklin Park, however, should not expect to see grade separations in the near future or even during their lifetimes. The Grand Avenue underpass, which was completed in 2007, took decades.

“Forty years,” Talbott said. “From the time of people saying we really need to have something done here to something actually being done.”

The Grand Avenue underpass cost about \$44 million with money coming mostly from a variety of federal, state and local government sources.

One possible source of funding might be the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency program, a public-private partnership formed in 2003 to improve railroads. Its participants include U.S. Department of

Transportation, state of Illinois, city of Chicago, Metra, Amtrak and freight railroads.

The program has identified 70 railroad improvement projects costing \$3.8 billion. Unfortunately, the bulk of the money for those projects has yet to be raised.

“A bit more than \$1 billion has been committed so far,” Murtha said. “Many grade separation projects are unfunded. Some of the more complex (separation projects) can easily be north of \$50 or \$60 million.”

Talbott likewise warns drivers not to get their hopes up.

“This is the first step in the planning process,” Talbott said.